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January 12, 2010

Washington, D.C. – The trial of seven Baha'i religious leaders in Iran for spying against Iran is a "sham" and should be condemned in the strongest possible terms by the international community, said the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) today.

The five men and two women—Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Vahid Tizfahm and Mahvash Sabet—who have been imprisoned since the spring of 2008, went on trial today, the official Iranian news service ISNA reported. In an apparent gaff, news agencies reported that the ISNA press release was posted hours before the Baha'is were taken to court. The charges could bring the death penalty.

"We are extremely concerned about the fate of the seven Baha'is, who could face the death penalty for several of the charges leveled against them today in court," said Leonard Leo, USCIRF chair. "It appears that the Iranian government has already predetermined the outcome, and is once again using its courts as an instrument of religious persecution in blatant violation of international human rights law."

The U.S. State Department, in a late night statement, condemned the Iranian government for deciding to hold the trial.

USCIRF was quick to join the international outcry.

"We commend the U.S. government on its strong statement of today and we urge the international community to put the Iranian government on notice that they will be held to account should the sham trial continue this week," said Mr. Leo.

Over the past few years, and especially after the contested June 2009 presidential election, the government has imposed harsh prison sentences on several prominent reformers from the Shi'a majority community, many of whom have been tried under criminal laws on trumped-up charges of "insulting Islam" and criticizing the Islamic Republic.

This systematic repression extends to religious minorities, particularly Baha'is, as well as Sufi Muslims, Jews, and Christians. During the past year, the Iranian government has intensified its targeting of these groups while increasing its anti-Semitic, Holocaust-denying rhetoric. Many Sufi Muslims remain in prison without charge and last month, at least five Christian converts were detained for worshipping in underground churches.

In addition to the seven Baha'i leaders who have been held for nearly two years, there are 40 other Baha'is in Iranian prisons solely for their religious beliefs. At least 13 more Baha'is were

arrested earlier this week, 10 of whom remain in detention. Last week, harsh prison sentences reportedly were handed down to nine Baha'is in the northern Iranian city of Mashhad. More than 200 Baha'is have been killed or executed since the Islamic Republic came to power some 30 years ago.

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan U.S. federal government commission. USCIRF Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

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